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ABSTRACT

The study reported here is an analysis of 100 seventh graders who were part of a 1989 and 1991 follow-up Phi Delta Kappa study on high risk students enrolled in general education. In 1989, 26 of the 100 students were identified as at risk. Approximately 39% of the at-risk students were identified as eligible for special education, the vast majority as learning disabled. After 2 years of program interventions, the at-risk students were still being retained and failing to a greater degree than their non-at-risk counterparts. They used and sold drugs to a greater degree and received lower grades. More at-risk students received intervention services than their non-at-risk counterparts, including smaller classes, tutoring, extra skill training, extra materials, and special teachers. Intervention strategies did not seem to differ between special education students at risk and other students at risk. (15 references.) (JDD)

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A Two Year Follow-Up Study on Junior High Students at Risk and Special Education Factors

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Abstract

This paper is a report of an indepth analysis of 100 seventh grade junior high students who were part of the 1989 and 1991 follow-up Phi Delta Kappa study on students at risk. Of the 26 students at risk, 10 (39%) were identified as eligible for special education. Intervention strategies did not seem to differ between special education students at risk and other students at risk. The strategies included small classes, special teachers, extra materials, and tutorial assistance. In addition, the school employed a wide range of formalized programs designed to prevent and/or remediate problems associated with such at risk factors as drugs, alcohol, poor grades, and poor self-concept. Unfortunately, there are still a number of at risk students who are being retained or suspended. Perhaps the policies, procedures, and safeguards associated with special education students need to be extended to other students who are at risk for failure.

In 1988, Phi Delta Kappa (PDK) International embarked on a major national study relative to students at risk in our schools (Frymier, 1989). Its purpose was to seek answers to the following questions: (a) Who is at risk?,(b) What are they like?, (c) What are the schools doing to help these students?, and (d) How effective are the schools' efforts? Using a simultaneous replication research approach (Frymier et al, 1989), data were collected on 22,018 students in 276 schools by 87 local Phi Delta Kappa Chapter research teams. Data were obtained on average 4th, 7th, and 10th grade students by interviewing teachers and principals as well as reviewing school records. An at risk score was assigned to each student based on 45 factors that previous research had identified as contributing to being at risk. Data were also obtained on the intervention strategies being used for students at risk as well as teachers and principals perceptions on the intervention strategies' effectiveness. In summary (Frymier and Gansneder, 1989), it would appear that between 25% and 35% of the students across the country could be considered at risk for failure either in school or life. Although there was great variance, the at risk student typically had poor grades, low self esteem, and little involvement with extra school activities. Schools are providing a wide range of interventions (Lombardi et al, 1991) with the general principles usually associated with special education widely used and considered effective by both teachers and principals. These include special teachers, individualized instruction, and close interactions with parents. Grade retention and lower tracks are still frequently used although seriously questioned by research reviews (Shepard and Smith, 1990). Lastly, factors associated with being at risk increase with age. Approximately 10% of the fourth graders, 25% of the 7th graders, and 44% of the tenth graders had significant at risk scores.

Through longitudinal follow up of the students in the study, Frymier and his colleagues plan on developing an instrument to measure risk that would not only be valid but also practical for educators to use (Frymier and Robertson, 1991). Whether the instrument, once developed, meets

criteria is yet to be established. What is established however is that students at risk is a complex, multifaceted problem with no easy solution. Whenever data are available, they must be carefully analyzed often using a single subject study approach (Steiner & Peifer, 1990; Phi Delta Kappa, 1991).

The study reported here is an indepth analysis of 100 seventh graders who were part of both the 1989 and 1991 followup research population. In 1989, 26 of the 100 students had at risk scores of 13 or higher. A score of 13 or higher indicated a student was in the upper 25% of all students at risk scores. Scores of 23 or higher put them in the upper 10%, 29 or higher in the upper 5%, 38 or higher in the upper 2%, and 44 or higher in the upper 1%. Scores for the 100 seventh graders which are addressed in this analysis range from 0 to 65. These students all attended the same junior high school in a University based city of 56,811 in a southeast rural state. Approximately 96% of the population are White, 2% Black, 1% Asian, and 1% Hispanic.

Characteristics

The general characteristics of the students by at risk status can be seen in Table 1. Approximately 25% are still considered at risk with almost three times as many males as females. These findings are consistent with previous reported national data (Frymier, 1989). There were statistically significant differences in the number of students at risk failing, retained, and suspended. These are factors that the school does have control over. The research consistently concludes that retaining students in grade is generally harmful; the probability of dropping out of school increased, and the likelihood of raising achievement levels decreased (Grissom & Shepard, 1988). Expectantly, the average reading and grade level were significantly lower for the at risk students. Of the 26 at risk students, 10 (39%) were identified as eligible for special education. Nine of these 10 were learning disabled, the other legally blind. While the average reading level for the non at risk student was at the 55% level, it was at the 15% level for the at risk students. The average grade was a C for the non at risk students: a D- for the at risk students.

Some of the at risk students were involved in both using and selling drugs. In 1987, an estimated 1,247 adolescents in West Virginia were treated for drug abuse problems and 83 were arrested for the sale of drugs (West Virginia Human Resources Association, 1988).

Interventions

There seems to be three major types of programs for students at risk: compensatory or other remedial programs, special education programs, and general education programs (Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989). The Phi Delta Kappa study, by design, eliminated all students who were not enrolled in regular classrooms. In other words, students who were enrolled full time in special education classes, alternative learning centers, received homebound instruction or any other special program arrangement were not included. The focus was on what general education is doing for students at risk.

As can be seen in Table 2, more students identified as at risk received a greater variety of strategies available than their non at risk peers. Most seem to be related to the tenants of special education: small classes, special teachers, extra materials, tutorial assistance, etc. Interestingly, adapted computer-assisted instruction was one strategy which was not heavily employed, although research supports its use (Slavin & Madden, 1989).

This junior high school is also involved in a variety of compensatory and/or remedial programs. A number of these are listed in Table 3. Project DARE is a preventive 7th grade program aimed at equipping youth with the skills to resist peer pressure to experiment and use harmful drugs. One of the unique features of Project DARE is the use of police officers as instructors. The lessons focus on four major areas: information about drugs and alcohol, decision making skills, peer pressure resistance, and alternatives to drug use. Academic Boosters is a volunteer tutor program. Teachers contact a parent tutor to notify them of the need and to develop a schedule. Tutoring of students is done on an individual or group basis. Natural Helpers are a cross section of students and staff identified through a school-wide survey as people with whom its comfortable to discuss personal problems. They are warm, supportive, trustworthy people who care about others and talk with the at risk students about their thoughts, feelings, and problems.

Although they are not professional therapists or counselors, they do receive training in communication skills, decision making, self assessment, and resources for help. Project KEEPS, funded by the Job Training Partnership Act, PL 97-300, is a pre-employment skills program designed to assist students having academic difficulties and needing supportive services to stay in school. It assists students in five areas: individual assessment and testing, life skills, identifying career goals and job skills, skills on how to become a more effective learner, and computer assisted instruction. The Southeast Regional Center for Drug Free Schools and Community is one of five regional centers in a national network established by the Drug Free Schools and Communities Act of 1986. The Center's philosophy is to promote effective, concerted and independent action in solving youth drug abuse problems at the community level. The Center trains teams to recognize and combat drug and alcohol abuse problems , assists schools in coordinating and strengthening their prevention and education programs, assists local education agencies and institutions of higher education in developing appropriate training programs for educational personnel, and evaluates and disseminates information on effective programs and strategies.

The data in Table 4 compares intervention for students at risk by special education status. For the most part, there seems to be very little difference. As one might expect, referral to a psychologist, special teacher, and special education itself is usually associated with students with learning disabilities or who are legally blind. The fact that these students are receiving their education in the regular classroom is consistent with the mainstreaming or regular education initiative recommended by a number of scholars and professionals (Reynolds & Wang, 1983; Will, 1986).

In addition, many states, including West Virginia, consider special education within the regular classroom as one of these service configurations (West Virginia Department of Education, 1991). There were small but statistically significant differences in the use of extra materials and the computer with the special education students. A closer examination of the special education students indicated more were in need of academic support and remediation than their at risk counterparts. Only one of the special education students was involved with drugs and alcohol.

Whereas a greater number of the non-special education students were involved with drugs, alcohol, and being abused. Their interventions would seem to require a greater degree of counseling and therapy. Although not evidenced by Table 4, the junior high school had a series of broad based programs which were designed to address both academic and personal/social needs. These programs were described in an earlier section.

Summary and Conclusion

After two years of program interventions, junior high at risk students are still being retained and failing to a greater degree than their non-at-risk counterparts. They use and sell drugs to a greater degree as well as receive lower grades. Approximately 39% of the at risk students have been identified as eligible for special education, the vast majority as learning disabled. More at risk students are given intervention strategies than their non at risk counterparts. These include smaller classes, tutoring, extra skill training, extra materials, and special teachers. It would appear that special education students who are at risk need interventions for academic problems to a greater degree than their at risk counterparts. Only one special education at risk student was involved with drugs and alcohol.

Although the school has a broad range of carefully designed programs to prevent and/or treat problems associated with being at risk, the use of suspension and retention is still in evidence. This may be more of a policy procedure which needs to be modified. It seems apparent that students at risk vary so that every person's intervention program must be individualized. Perhaps the policies, procedures, and safeguards which have been recognized for special education students need be expanded to include all students who are at risk.

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Table 1 Characteristics of Students by At-Risk Status

Characteristic	Not at Risk n = 70	At Risk n = 26	Chi-Square
Sex	Male Female 34 36	Male Female 19 7	4.10 p<.05
Jail	0	1	2.72
Dropout	1	1	.54
Failed	7	12	21.75 p<.05
Retained	1	8	19.21 p<.05
Suspended	6	8	24.86 p<.05
Expelled	1	0	.38
Pregnant	1	0	.38
Uses Drugs	0	3	8.34 p<.05
Sells Drugs	0	2	5.50 p<.05
Alcohol Abuse	3	4	3.45
Abused	3	4	3.45
Not Enrolled	9	8	3.39
Ave. Reading	3.53	1.33	26.31 p<.05
Ave. Grade	2.98	1.57	24.11 p<.05

Table 2 Interventions for Students by At-Risk Status

Intervention	Not at Risk n = 70	At Risk n = 26	Chi-Square
Small Classes	19	18	14.08 p<.05
Computer	39	14	0.03
Recommend Special Ed.	26	19	9.83 p<.05
Low Group	11	22	39.90 p<.05
Own Teacher	25	21	15.42 p<.05
Flexible Schedule	56	25	1.75
Tutor	8	12	12.52 p<.05
Extra Homework	12	6	.02
Parental Involvement	58	23	.86
Extra Skills	5	17	36.40 p<.05
Psychologist	15	14	9.45 p<.05
Extra Material	13	17	19.34 p<.05
Special Teacher	19	19	16.73 p<.05

Table 3 Prevention and Remedial Projects for At-Risk Students

Project DATE -	Drug Abuse Resistance Education
Academic Boosters -	Tutors who volunteer to assist students with academic problems
Natural Helpers -	Students and staff who are selected to assist students with personal problems
Project KEEPS -	Know the Essential Employment Preparation Skills
Southeast Regional - Center for Drug-Free Schools and Community	Member of this federally sponsored program

Table 4 Interventions for Students at Risk by Special Education Status

Intervention	Special Ed. n = 10	Not Special Ed. n = 16	Chi-Square Value
Small Classes	8	10	.88
Computer	8	6	4.47 p<.05
Recommend Special Ed.	10	9	5.99 p<.05
Low Group	10	12	2.95
Own Teacher	10	11	3.01
Flexible Schedule	10	15	.65
Tutor	7	5	3.71
Extra Homework	4	2	2.62
Parental Involvement	10	13	2.12
Extra Skills	8	9	1.53
Psychologist	8	6	4.47 p<.05
Extra Material	10	7	8.60 p<.05
Special Teacher	10	9	5.99 p<.05